# INTRODUCTION

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Looking at the history of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policies in the European Union over the last two decades means looking at a story of a remarkable success – or so it seems when we take as a measure of success the amount of pertinent policy documents and related academic writing published during that period. Aiming to transform itself into the world's 'most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy' (European Council, 2000), Europe had clearly identified ECEC as a key policy area to realising an ambitious macro-political agenda.



The importance given to services for young children in European policy (despite the fact that the EU has no powers to govern early childhood provision at Member State level) was mirrored, from early on, in the recognition of the importance of the early childhood workforce. Quality for children, the policies insist, depends on a highly skilled, motivated and valued workforce. But it was not quite as clear what exactly characterises a productive relationship between quality and qualifications, or what we mean by 'highly skilled'. The Terms of Reference for the research project that led to this book – Competence Requirements in ECEC – state that 'little is known about the relationship between high quality ECEC services and the competences of the staff providing it'. In consequence, the EU Commission identifies the need 'to work towards a common understanding of the issue at European level'.

In CoRe, we endeavoured to do just that. We looked in detail at how professional practice can be understood, and its development supported, in the highly complex field of working with young children, families and communities. Considering the diversity of a European Union consisting of 28 Member States, what approaches have different countries taken – and what are the lessons that can be learnt from practices developed by practitioners, training institutions and policy makers across Europe? We explored conceptualisations of *competence* and professionalism in early childhood, and we identified systemic conditions for developing, supporting and

maintaining competence at all levels of the early childhood system. The study consisted of a literature study, a survey on curricula for the different early years professions in 15 countries and a series of seven in-depth case studies on how these recent challenges are met in diverse contexts. Our approach, the methodology and findings, together with recommendation of action that we think should be taken at national and EU level, are documented in detail in the project reports (Urban et al., 2011a, 2011b) and other publications (Urban et al., 2012). Yet, the seven CoRe case studies have never been published before – they form the core of this book.

## A short hindsight

In the years after the Second World War and even more so in the 1970s, ECEC slowly developed in most affluent countries. Since the 1980s, the economic crisis drew the attention of policy makers to the economic aspects of ECEC. As a result, a renewed attention for ECEC could be noticed, it focused on the role of ECEC for female employment and equal opportunities for men and women in the labour market (Moss, 1988). The idea that sufficient ECEC was a necessary condition for economic growth gained momentum in a context of economic downturn and falling birth rates. As a consequence, Member States were looking for possibilities to increase the number of ECEC places, while observing budgetary constraints, and thus were in search of cheap solutions. These were primarily sought in two directions: familiarisation and marketisation.



Familiarisation means the growing number of childcare places organised by mushrooming child-minders or family daycare providers. Indeed, in the 1980s many affluent countries stimulated home-based ECEC (Mooney & Statham, 2003). The idea was that, as these child-minders have low levels of education, they are at risk of unemployment and creating ECEC places with this workforce would therefore serve three goals: cheaper places, combating unemployment and facilitating female employment. This was the case in such diverse countries as Belgium, Hungary, Germany, New Zealand and many others (Mooney & Statham, 2003) and it was legitimated by a home as heaven ideology. Of course, as Moss (1988) rightly noted, whether it actually was cheaper depended on the pay, the conditions and the support given to these caregivers.

The second trend, privatisation, means that ECEC was commoditised as a good on the market and several countries (e.g. England, the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Netherlands, but also Taiwan, Hong Kong, some Canadian provinces and many others) have encouraged private initiatives, with less or no state funding to respond to the increasing need for childcare places. As staff costs represent the most important expense for private ECEC managers, it was obvious that the marketisation also reinforced the search for cheap labour force in ECEC (Moss, 2009; Osgood, 2006; Penn, forthcoming).

In sum, for several decades of the previous century, the political attention was predominantly focused on the *quantity* of ECEC. An eloquent example of this is the Lisbon Agreement (European Parliament, 2000) pleading for economic

development in the EU and the subsequent Barcelona targets (European Parliament, 2002) setting quantitative goals for the numbers of ECEC places Member states should have on offer.

More recently, however, attention grew not only for the economic functions of ECEC, but also for its educational and social value. As Penn (2009) noted, while the economic function is merely concerned with the number of places, the educational and social functions also entail concerns about their *quality*. Conceptualisations of quality may considerably differ, according to different understandings of what constitutes the educational and social missions of ECEC (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Penn, 2009). Nevertheless, there is overwhelming evidence that the competences of staff matters (Early et al., 2007). As a result, there have been several attempts to study professionalism in European ECEC (e.g. Cameron, Mooney, & Moss, 2002; Oberhümer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010).

In sum, while many Member States face a historical burden of having invested in a workforce with low qualifications, we now know that qualifications and competences matter. As a result, many nation states need to bridge the gap between the reality of the ECEC workforce and their ambition to invest in the best possible life for the next generation. This book presents different ways in which several nations are going about this endeavour.

## People matter



The fact that more effort is needed to increase the quality of ECEC provision (Penn, 2009) and that competences of practitioners working with children, as well as ongoing support for them, are crucial in promoting ECEC quality (Children in Scotland, 2011) have progressively been acknowledged in the European research and policy debate. As stressed in the research overview conducted by Bennett and Moss within the cross-European programme 'Working for inclusion' (Bennett & Moss, 2011), the early years workforce is central to ECEC provision – as it accounts for the greater part of the total cost of early childhood services – and is the major factor affecting children's learning experiences and outcomes. In recent years, a growing consensus has emerged that the way ECEC staff are recruited, trained and treated is critical for the quality of early childhood services as well as for the educational success of all children.

Such a consensus is grounded on international research evidence showing that better educated staff are more likely to provide high-quality pedagogy and stimulating learning environments, which in turn, foster children's development leading to better learning outcomes (Munton et al., 2002). At the same time, research shows that staff competence is one of the most salient factors ensuring higher quality in educational interactions (Litjens & Taguma, 2010). Competent educators nurture children's development by creating rich and stimulating early learning environments, by intentionally sustaining shared thinking and logical reasoning in social interactions and by valuing children's initiatives for extending their learning opportunities (Pramling & Pramling, 2011; Sylva et al., 2004).

Despite the substantial evidence showing that staff qualifications matter, research also points out that qualifications *per se* are not sufficient to determine the quality of ECEC provision (OECD, 2012). The content of the training – as well as the methodologies adopted for its delivery – also play a crucial role in increasing the professional competence of educators. In this regard, research findings also show that continuous professional development initiatives ('in-service training') may be equally important as initial professional preparation ('pre-service training' leading to officially recognised qualifications), provided these are of sufficient length and intensity (Fukkink & Lont, 2007). A recent report on the importance of professional development, published by Eurofound, points out success factors for continuous professional development initiatives:

- a coherent pedagogical framework or learning curriculum that builds upon research and addresses local needs;
- the active involvement of practitioners in the process of improving educational practice enacted within their settings;
- a focus on practice-based learning taking place in constant dialogue with colleagues, parents and local communities;
- the provision of enabling working conditions, such as the availability of paid hours for non-contact time and the presence of a mentor or coach who facilitate practitioners' reflection in reference groups.



Professional development initiatives based on research-based enquiry or action-research can help staff reflect on their pedagogical practice and therefore contribute to its ongoing improvement. Many of the factors listed above are represented in the CoRe case studies in this book. We believe they can serve as a source of inspiration for developing more effective approaches for sustaining the professional growth of early childhood practitioners and the continuous improvement of their educational practice for the benefits of children, families and local communities.

## CoRe: A European study

The political attention for not only quantity of ECEC but also its quality is reflected in several initiatives from the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission. It was clearly present in the 2011 statement on the importance of early childhood education (European Commission, 2011), as well as in a comprehensive study on competence requirements for the early childhood workforce, commissioned in 2010 to a consortium of the University of East London and Ghent University (Urban et al., 2011). The study consisted of a literature study, a survey on curricula for the different early years professions in 15 countries and a series of seven in-depth case studies on how these recent challenges are met in diverse contexts.

Projects like CoRE, as reported in this book, are exercises in interrogating complex contexts of public policy and professional practice. They require taking

into consideration a multiplicity of perspectives, understandings and interests, all grounded in the diverse contexts of a large number of partners including, but never limited to, those of the members of the research team (Urban, 2012). The deliberate use of the term 'partner', instead of the ubiquitous 'stakeholder' with its managerial connotations (Thomas, 2012), is a first and necessary act of positioning undertaken by the research team driving the project. It recognises the agency of those connected to our project without pretending that CoRe is the only, or even main, focus of their interest. It is more likely that the 'stakes' they are 'holding' are in the local initiatives and projects presented in this book. Their legitimate interests come together with ours, the 'researchers', in a specific period of time in the CoRe project.

The complexity of the task of creating a better understanding of the 'competence requirements in early childhood education and care' in an entity as diverse as Europe led us to adopt a complex research strategy from the outset. We had to find way to bring together very different aspects of situated knowledge and experience in one shared framework. The literature review enabled us to bring together and analyse condensed collective and disciplinary understandings of key concepts and terms underlying this project: profession, competence, quality, etc. The survey, carried out in 15 countries, enabled us to gather, interpret and systematise professional knowledge through the lens of a number of professional actors, each one with vast experience in ECEC practices in their respective country contexts. The two approaches (literature review, survey) opened windows into non-mainstream *conceptualisations* of professional practice, and into *informed interpretations* of how these translate into actual professional profiles, frameworks, regulations etc. in specific country contexts. However, in order to better understand *how things work* (Stake, 2010), we had to include a third approach into the CoRe research strategy.



The purpose of including a number of in-depth case studies into the project was to gain a deeper understanding of the background, the dynamics, the success factors and challenges of *specific* practices in their *specific* contexts. We were interested, in short, in the *thick of what is going on*, as Clifford Geertz might have put it (Geertz, 1973), and for *whom*, and *why*.

Case study work is, in the words of Robert Stake, 'the science of the particular' (Stake, 2010, p. 13). In other words, conducting case studies in a European research environment is certainly not the science of representation. Building a sample of cases studies (seven were selected and are now included as chapters in this book) is by definition a selective process that involves making informed choices about what to include in, and what to exclude from the overall study. Our choices for the CoRe case studies sample were framed by three parameters (Urban et al., 2012):

1. We wanted to include cases that are considered to be examples of *interesting practices of high quality* by experienced professionals, international experts and in international reports and literature
2. We wanted each case to shine a light on a different approach to organising early childhood services and on different understandings of early childhood

professionalism across Europe and its variety of EC systems (e.g. *split* or *integrated* systems, *generic* or *specific* professions, different *levels of formal qualifications*, different professional *support systems*)

3. We wanted, as far as possible within the limitations of the project, to construct a geographically balanced sample, ensuring participation from countries in different regions of Europe.

## What is the case? Framing the seven CoRe case studies

As mentioned above, case studies, by their very nature, are about specific practices and experiences, not about generalisation and representativeness. For the examples selected for the CoRe project, and the chapters in this book, this means that although the cases are situated in their specific regional contexts, our aim was not to study the countries or regions. Rather, we were interested in the particularities of the individual examples. Experiences made by colleagues at the Ecole Santé Social Sud-Est (ESSSE) in Lyon may be situated in France – and some understanding of the French ECEC context is needed in order to make sense of them – but they are by no means representative of the French early childhood system in general.

CoRe case studies were conducted by local experts and project partners (the authors of the chapters compiled in this book) according to a briefing document provided by the CoRe research team. The document asked the authors to provide a *thick description* of the case, drawing on information gathered in ways they thought most appropriate for their example, including document analyses, focus group discussions, conversations, own observations etc. We asked all authors to provide some contextual information (e.g. relevant local policies, regulations) and a discussion of the understanding of professional knowledge underpinning their particular case. More specifically, we asked the authors to address the following aspects:



- Professional knowledge, theory and practice: how are they understood, what is seen as relevant (and why), who takes part in the co-construction of professional knowledge?
- Critical reflection and transformative practice: who are the actors in the specific case? How are practitioners, children, families and communities involved in the specific practices?
- Structural aspects of professional practice and their implications: e.g. job mobility, diversity and equality, gender, pay, autonomy, time and resources.

Given the diversity of the cases it was clear that not all case studies would address these aspects in this particular order or in clear distinction. We expected overlap and blurring of boundaries to be the norm rather than the exception. Authors were strongly encouraged not to press an interesting example into shape as to fit the questions. This was a two-pronged approach that allowed for the greatest possible amount of freedom for the authors while at the same time creating a structural equivalence (Burt, 1982) that allowed a shared analysis across

complex documented experiences. The methodology of free standing but related case studies builds on approaches taken by previous research projects, in particular the Strategies for Change project (Urban, 2007) and the Day in the Life of an Early Years Practitioner project (Miller et al., 2012). Such an approach requires a huge amount of *trust* in the professional judgement of partners and a willingness by the research team to follow David Winnicott's trust in young mothers: 'To begin with, you will be relieved to know that I am not going to tell you what to do' (Winnicott, 1987, p. 15).

## The seven case studies conducted for CoRe are:

- The Danish Pedagogue Education: principles, understandings and transformations of a generalist approach to professionalism – Paedagoguddanelsen JYDSK, VIA University College, Denmark.
- A qualifying training at BA level of *Éducateurs Jeunes Enfants* (EJE) for early years workers with low qualifications – Ecole Santé Social Sud-Est, Lyon, France.
- Origins and evolution of professionalism in the context of municipal ECEC institutions – City of Pistoia, Italy.
- Pedagogical Guidance as pathway to professionalisation – City of Gent, Belgium.
- Inter-professional collaboration in preschool and primary school contexts – Slovenia.
- Professional and competence development in the context of the 'Where there are no preschools' (WTANP) project – Poland.
- The Integrated Qualifications Framework and the Early Years Professional Status: a shift towards a graduate led workforce – England.



## Reaching beyond the mainstream

One of the unique features of the CoRe research project was that it could benefit from the input of scholars from many different countries and therefore from literature beyond the mainstream. Indeed, mainstream literature is published merely in English and the dominance of English in academic literature inevitably also entails an impoverishment, as it either silences some fields of study, or translates them into what makes sense for an English language audience. In both cases something of the plurality of perspectives risks getting lost. In fact, the diversity of welfare states, ECEC and training systems in Europe over time has generated a great variety of professional development approaches across countries (Oberhümer, 2012). It has been documented, however, that such richness of approaches is not fully and equally represented in English language literature, due to the fact that research studies carried out in this field – ECEC institutions and their workforce – tend to be closely linked to countries' welfare traditions and educational cultures (Eurofound, 2015). As a consequence, impact studies evaluating the effectiveness of designed

training programmes tend to be over-represented in English language literature, dominated by studies from the US, Australia and the UK where the investment in ECEC has been traditionally justified by economic productivity arguments. On the contrary, studies exploring broader social pedagogical approaches and participatory methods to practitioners' ongoing professionalisation are more often found in academic literature published in national languages, within those countries where ECEC has been, since its inception, considered as a public good within a 'children's right' rationale (see Penn, 2009 for a more in-depth analysis of political and welfare rationales).

The English language literature reviewed in the CoRe study highlighted that the relationship between ECEC quality and staff qualification is far from being causal but rather depends on the interaction of multiple factors, such as:

- the content of training programmes (curriculum design);
- the delivery of training programmes (the strategies that are used to combine theory and practice);
- the contextual conditions provided by the settings where training interventions take place (e.g. availability of non-contact time, team work, or supervision).

From this review, it also emerged that such factors are still largely unexplored in Anglo-American literature. Therefore, the scope of the review has been widened in order to include literature published in other European languages (French, Italian, Danish, Croatian and Dutch, as these were the languages spoken in the research team), offering interesting insights for re-framing the concept of competence within the broader study.



The Italian literature sheds light on the systemic conditions that are necessary for linking quality with professional competences. The issue of early childhood professionalism in Italy has been explored in relation to ECEC quality within a specific strand of literature that originated during the 1990s in accordance with an international trend and with reference to the work of the European Commission Childcare Network. During this period, several regional and local governments supported the experiences of participatory evaluation of early childhood institutions (*nidi*), which were carried out together by policy makers, local administrators, pedagogical coordinators and university researchers, and which involved practitioners and families (Barberi et al., 2002). The aim of these studies was not only to promote quality within ECEC services but also to reflect, at the institutional level, on the concept of quality as defined in relation to the needs expressed by all the actors involved. In this perspective, quality was defined as 'a democratic process of negotiating aims and goals by enhancing public debate on educational issues' and the process of participatory quality evaluation was conceived in formative terms (Bondioli & Ghedini, 2000). Participatory educational evaluation, in this sense, is seen as a hermeneutical process that fosters competence development by promoting a critical problematisation of practitioners' educational actions: the result of this ongoing process is the collective production of exchangeable professional knowledge (Musatti et al.,

2010). Therefore, in the Italian context, collegiality (*collegialitá*) is a key feature of ECEC work, nurturing professionalism through practitioners' mutual commitment ('educational co-responsibility') towards the achievement of common purposes made explicit in the pedagogical project of the early childhood service. This collegial approach to staff professionalisation is rooted in the experiences of community involvement and parents' participation, matured in the context of municipal services in Northern and Central Italy over the last 40 years. It contributed to shape the role of early childhood practitioners in relation to the needs of children, families and local communities within which and for which early childhood services were conceived (Galardini & Giovannini, 2001).

In Croatian literature too, issues of professional competence and the professional development of early childhood practitioners are discussed within a systemic approach to the quality of educational institutions. Within this strand of literature, educational quality is not conceived as the result of individual practitioners' interventions, but it is rather considered a feature of the entire context of the institution, of which practitioners are an integral part and which practitioners can change according to their degree of understanding. Within this approach, it is argued that enhancing practitioners' understandings of the institutional contexts in which they are operating enables them to shape new beliefs for the development of educational practices aimed at improving the quality of the institutions (Žogla, 2008). In this sense, a crucial role is played by professional development that should be carried out within institutions themselves and that should be focusing on joint action-research (Slunjski, 2008), self-evaluation (Ljubetid, 2008) and collective reflectivity on educational practices generating new theoretical knowledge (Šagud, 2008). In this context, practitioners' professional development is conceptualised as a continuous process that – being subject to review and change – raises the level of practitioners' pedagogical competence. Within this strand of literature, the role of practitioners is currently being redefined within a shifting paradigm that conceives ECEC institutions as democratic learning communities promoting children's development from a rights-based perspective, which is framed by the UN Convention on the Right of the Child (Milanovid et al., 2000). Within this shift of paradigm, practitioners' professionalism is grounded on ethically responsible educational practices that are inextricably linked to the external social context. In this sense, the introduction of open communication with equal rights for every participant in the educational process, the enhancement of a culture of quality, and the increased consciousness for responsibility in a collegial and individual manner become essential elements of ethically responsible practices (Krstovid & Čepid, 2005).

The Danish interpretation of professionalism is closely connected to the view of the 'competent child' (Brembeck et al., 2004). Therefore, early childhood teaching is not seen as a specific activity, but it is rather perceived as a side issue (Jensen & Langsted, 2004). In a child-oriented approach to care, the concern exists that the nursery schools afford children so much freedom that learning and development may be compromised in some way. This concern led to discussion and to the

reforming of the 'Nordic model' during the last decades of the twentieth century (Broström, 2006). In the law of 1964 instituting ECEC services in Denmark, there were no guidelines for the pedagogical content of the work of the 'pedagogue'; only some general aims and educational principles were described (Broström, 2006). Instead, in 2004 – following PISA results showing that Danish children's learning was at a low level – a curriculum was introduced for young children. Even though the curriculum is very open and reflects the nursery school tradition, many Danish pedagogues and researchers view the curriculum act as a problematic step towards more bureaucratic state regulation and as an adjustment to schooling (Broström, 2006). The professional organisation of pedagogues, BUPL, reacted to this challenge by making the pedagogic vision of the pedagogue more explicit by initiating a discussion on the interpretation of professionalism (BUPL, 2006). The professional expertise of the pedagogues is based on personal competences and on an awareness of one's own norms and values. It encompasses both theoretical and practical knowledge of the development of children, of play and of friendship. The Danish pedagogues state that their work can be described as multidimensional: providing care, socialisation of the community, '*Bildung*' for citizenship and democracy and learning through the development of individual skills (BUPL, 2006). For this reason, professional preparation of prospective pedagogues cannot only be concerned with theoretical learning within higher education institutions or with the mastery of practical skills in the workplace (Bayer, 2001). Instead, given the multidimensional professionalism that characterise pedagogues, initial professional preparation and competence development is seen as a recursive interplay of theory and practice that takes place along a continuum from the college to the workplace and from the workplace to the college (Bayer, 2001).



Along the same line, within the French context, the method of *analyse des pratiques* for professional development of social and educational professions was elaborated by the Parisian *Centre de Recherche sur la Formation*. By considering professionalisation as an infinite process of competence transformation in relation to a process of transformation of educational practice, the objective of this method is to reflect on professional practice from a theoretical framework (Barbier, 2006; Wittorski, 2005). This professionalisation process is steered and supported through the analysis of the students' and professionals' practical experiences, which first takes place on an individual basis and then in groups (Meunier, 2004). In the French context, this methodology is adopted either in the training courses for *Educateurs Jeunes Enfants* and in team-based professional development initiatives within early childhood services (Fablet, 2004). In fact, the method of *analyse des pratiques* does not solely aim at the acquisition of knowledge, but also at the production of knowledge starting from concrete situations (Meunier, 2004). In the first year, via this analysis of internship experiences, the foundations are laid for a personal track towards professionalism. In the second and third years, the situations that the students experience and that have raised questions are discussed in the group. Using this approach, Meunier (2004) seeks to develop new competences among the students, so that it then becomes possible

for them – later, as professionals – to anticipate unforeseen pedagogic situations. Therefore, the *analyse des pratiques* is a method intending to elicit more questions than answers and this in the context of critical analysis and co-operation (Favre, 2004). By discussing the situations in the group – and by seeking solutions collectively – the *analyse des pratiques* contributes to the creation of a theoretical basis for pedagogic actions. With this position, Favre concurs with Dahlberg and Moss (2005) advocating 'minor politics', by which professionals, children and parents together create a new type of knowledge.

In the Netherlands and Belgium there is a tradition of pedagogical coaching to increase the level of professionalism for low qualified childcare workers. Such experiments started in the 1980s and were supported by grants from the Bernard van Leer Foundation. In Flanders, the first experiments were set up in the 1990s in Ghent (Peeters, 1993, see the chapter on the Ghent case study in this book) in the Netherlands (Van Keulen & Del Barrio, 2010) and the French-speaking part of Belgium (Pirard, 2005). In the Flemish experiments, the professionalisation process is considered as a social practice and as a result of complex interactions between social evolutions (e.g. the growing diversity of families), policy measures (e.g. new legislation) and new scientific insights. The pedagogical counselling or coaching projects in Belgium and the Netherlands focus on practitioners as active actors in their own professionalisation process, which has a motivating effect on the learners (Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2011; Van Keulen & Del Barrio, 2010).



The review of non-English-language literature carried out within the CoRe study lead to the conclusion that a narrow conceptualisation of competence as a set of predefined knowledge, skills and attitudes universally applicable is not appropriate in the ECEC field. Rather, professional competences in the ECEC field need to be conceptualised within a multidimensional framework – which encompass both individual and collective components – and understood as a process that constantly evolves in socio-cultural contexts. In sum, rather than discussing staff competences, we need to discuss competent *systems*, consisting of four levels of competences. The first level is the level of individual practitioners and at this level the study advocates for combinations of pre-service training and sustained in-service training. Equally important is the second level of team competences, including for instance paid hours away from the children to make in-service training sustainable. The third level is the level of inter-institutional competences, favouring the collaboration between local early years provision with other social educational and cultural institutions. And finally there is the crucial level of governance competences regarding vision, finance and monitoring. For each of these levels, the CoRe study formulated examples of competences about knowledge, practices and values. While the conclusions and recommendations of the study have been disseminated, the case studies, generating thick and rich insights, have remained unpublished so far. The case studies presented in the following chapters shed light on how ECEC practitioners' competences can be fostered through the diversity of approaches and methods elaborated within EU member states' pedagogical traditions.

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